

# Lecture 2

## Why Conversation Fails?

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# Why do conversations go wrong?

- Conversation is a life skill
- Conversation fails because of failure to make one of its four components right
  - **context**
  - relationship
  - structure
  - behavior

# Putting conversations in context

- All conversations have a context. They happen for a reason.
- Most conversations are part of developing relationship.
- Many conversations fail because one or both of us ignore the context
- If we don't check that we understand why the conversation is happening, we may very quickly start to misunderstand each other.

# Putting conversations in context

- Other obvious problems that afflict the context of the conversation include:
  - not giving enough time to the conversation;
  - holding the conversation at the wrong time;
  - conversing in an uncomfortable, busy or noisy place;
  - a lack of privacy;
  - distractions.

# Putting conversations in context

- All conversations start from assumptions. If we leave them unquestioned, misunderstandings and conflict can quickly arise. For example, we might assume that:
  - we both know what we are talking about;
  - we need to agree;
  - we know how the other person views the situation;
  - the other person is somehow to blame for the problem;
  - we can be brutally honest;
  - we need to solve the other person's problem;
  - we're right and they're wrong.

# Putting conversations in context

- We can't think without mental models.  
Thinking is the process of developing and changing our mental models.

# Putting conversations in context

- **Key factors: context**
- **Objectives.** Do you both know why you are holding the conversation?
- **Time.** Is this the right time to be holding this conversation? What is the history behind the conversation? Is it part of a larger process?
- **Place.** Are you conversing in a place that is comfortable, quiet and free from distractions?
- **Assumptions.** Do you both understand the assumptions that you are starting from? Do you need to explore them before going further?

# Why conversation fails

- Conversation fails because of failure to make one of its four components right
  - context
  - **relationship**
  - structure
  - behavior

# Working out the relationship

- **relationship**
  - Our relationship defines the limits and potential of our conversation.
  - We converse differently with complete strangers and with close friends.
  - A difficult relationship may cause us to speak in code.
  - Conversations are ways of establishing, fixing or changing a relationship

# Working out the relationship

- **relationship**
  - Relationships are neither fixed nor permanent. They are complex and dynamic. Our relationship operates along a number of dimensions, including:
    - status;
    - power;
    - role;
    - liking.
    - Territory

# Working out the relationship

- **Relationship: *Status***
  - We can define status as the rank we grant to another person in relation to us.
  - We see ourselves simply as higher or lower in status in relation to the other person



# Working out the relationship

- **Relationship: *Status***

- Status affects the degree of respect, familiarity or reserve we grant them
- Conversations can fail because the status relationship limits what we can say to each other
- If we feel low in status relative to the other person, we may agree to everything they say and suppress strongly held ideas of our own
- If we feel high in status relative to them, we may tend to discount what they say, put them down, interrupt or ignore them.

# Working out the relationship

- **Relationship: *Status***
  - ***Our status is always at risk.*** It is created entirely through the other person's perceptions. It can be destroyed or diminished in a moment.  
Downgrading a person's status can be a powerful way of exerting your authority over them.

# Working out the relationship

- **Relationship: *Status***
  - Ex. Rank your self compared to the person next to you
  - Ex. Think of a conversation when you think of your self low and another one when you think of your self high
  - Ex. Remember a situation when you said some thing that destroyed your image or you heard some thing that destroyed other person image

# Working out the relationship

- **Relationship: *Power***

- Power is the control we can exert over others. If we can influence or control people's behavior in any way, we have power over them.



# Working out the relationship

- **Relationship: *Power***

- Five types of power

- **Reward power:** the ability to grant favors for behavior;
    - **Coercive power:** the ability to punish others;
    - **Legitimate power:** conferred by law or other sets of rules;
    - **Referent power:** the 'charisma' that causes others to imitate.
    - **Expert power:** deriving from specific levels of knowledge or skill.

# Working out the relationship

- **Working out the relationship** Conversations often fail because they become power struggles.
  - People may seek to exercise different kinds of power at different points in a conversation.
  - Seduction is another way in which power afflicts our conversations.
  - The other person has used their power to seduce you away from what you wanted to talk about towards their area of interest.

# Working out the relationship

- **Working out the relationship**
  - **Convening power: an emergent force**
  - People are beginning to talk about a new form of power.
  - Convening power is defined by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office as ‘the ability to bring the right people together’. It’s the power of ‘connectors’, who are often at the heart of effective networking.

# Working out the relationship

- Ex.
  - Try a conversation when you change your power during the conversion.
  - Classify 4 different conversion with different people according to the relationship power.

# Working out the relationship

- **Relationship: *Role***

- A role is a set of behaviors that people expect of us.
- Roles are either formal or informal
- Conversations may fail because our roles are unclear, or in conflict. We tend to converse with each other in role.
- If the other person knows that your formal role is an accountant, for example, they will tend to converse with you in that role.
- If they know that your informal role is usually the devil's advocate, or mediator, or licensed fool, they will adapt their conversation to that role



# Working out the relationship

- **Relationship: *Role***
  - Belbin's list of roles for management
    - Chair/Coordinator;
    - Shaper/Team leader;
    - Plant/Innovator or creative thinker;
    - Monitor–evaluator/Critical thinker;
    - Company worker/Implementer;
    - Team worker/Team builder;
    - Finisher/Detail checker and pusher;
    - Resource investigator/Researcher outside the team;
    - Expert.

# Working out the relationship

- **Relationship: *Role***

- A particular danger of such analysis is that people will label themselves with a role and start to operate exclusively within it.
- The conversations that result will tend to be limited by the perceived roles that are operating.

# Working out the relationship

- **Relationship: *Role***
- Ex. List your role in most of your conversation at home and at college

# Working out the relationship

- Relationship: *Liking*
- Conversations can fail because we dislike each other. But they can also go wrong because we like each other a lot!
- We can find people attractive in many different ways or take against them in ways we may not be able to communicate.



# Working out the relationship

- **Relationship: *Territory***
  - A successful conversation seeks out the shared territory, the common ground between us.
  - But we guard our own territory carefully. As a result, many conversational rules are about how we ask and give permission for the other person to enter our territory.
  - We often move around the borders of an issue because we are uncertain whether we would be welcome on that part of the other person's territory.
  - We can feel invaded if the other person raises a matter that we feel is out of bounds to them.



# Working out the relationship

- **Relationship: *Territory***

- The success of a conversation may depend on whether you give or ask clearly for such permission.
- People often ask for or give permission in code; you may only receive the subtlest hint, or feel inhibited from giving more than a clue of your intentions.
- Often, it's only when the person reacts that you realize you have intruded on private territory.

# Working out the relationship

- Ex.
  - List your territories when dealing with close friend
  - When dealing with strangers

# Working out the relationship

## Key factors: relationship

- **Status.** Is there a marked difference in status between you? Why is that? How does this difference affect the way you are behaving towards the other person? How do you think it might be affecting their behaviour?
- **Power.** Can you see power being wielded in the conversation? What kind of power and in which direction? How might you both be affecting the power relationship? How do you want to affect it?
- **Role.** What is your role in this conversation? Think about your formal role (your job title perhaps, or contractual position) and your informal role. How do people see you acting in conversations? Can you feel yourself falling naturally into any particular role in the conversation?
- **Liking.** How is the conversation being affected by your feelings towards each other? Is the liking or disliking getting in the way of a productive outcome?
- **Territory.** Where are the boundaries? Are you finding common ground? Where can you give permission for the other person to enter your territory? Where can you ask permission to enter theirs?

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